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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway was wrong. It is not necessary to leave home and go out and experience "Life" in capital letters to have "stuff" about which to write. The daughter of a kindergarten teacher, Louisa May Alcott wrote a book about her family life which became one of the most popular children's classics, "Little Women." All people are storytellers. Life stories order and interpret life events. Listeners/readers sympathize or empathize, and writers explore this when choosing moments from their lives to share with others. Alice Walker, a sharecropper's daughter and author of "The Color Purple," felt ugly, disfigured, and suicidal when she was blinded in a childhood accident. A later poem, "On Sight," spoke of her joy at seeing the African desert. While she was studying at Sarah Lawrence College, pregnancy and a subsequent abortion were inspiration for "Once," her first published book of poetry. One of her professors, the poet Muriel Rukeyser, passed Alice's poems along to her own editor at Harcourt, who later became Alice's editor too. Out of Alice Walker's isolation grew her art, and the written word would sustain her survival, a passionate testimony to the power of the artist to use her art to overcome life's hardest blows. (Contains "On Sight" and 17 references.) (CR)

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The Personal Past as Inspiration: Authors Honor Their Life Experiences in Their Stories

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois, November 21-26, 1996

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Ernest Hemingway was wrong! And I say this without fear even though yet another version of "A Farewell to Arms" is about to appear in movie theaters. We do not need to purposely leave home and go out and experience LIFE in capital letters in order to have stuff about which to write. We can live our lives and still find "stuff" to write about.

Over 100 years ago a kindergarten teacher's daughter, living constantly on the brink of poverty, realized this very simple fact about writing. Louisa May Alcott wrote about her family life and the interactions of family members to create in Little Women one of the most popular children's classics about ordinary, daily life. The New York Public Library lists Little Women as one of their two most circulated titles. First published in 1868, by 1968 Little Women had been published in more than 30 countries (Russ, 1969, p. 521). In 1994, more than 125 years after its publication, Little Women saw two more editions (Little, Brown and Alfred A. Knopf's Everyman's Library) and the third rendering of the motion picture. While we may speculate that public taste does not necessarily determine great literature, public taste is also fickle. For a work to be an instant best seller, remain in print, endure more than a century, and still speak to readers, there has to be something to its story. Louisa's example gives us an important lesson.

We are all storytellers. Granted some of us may be better at telling stories than some others, but nevertheless we all tell stories every day. The simplest version of our stories is our response to, "How was your day?" and we hold forth on how our alarm didn't go off, our car wouldn't start, we forgot an important meeting, our daughter is

getting married to the wrong guy, etc. or on the (better) other hand, we bought a new house, our son is accepted to Harvard, we are spending a month in Bali, etc. We introduce a topic and then we elaborate. These daily personal experiences become part of the collection of stories which comprises each of our lives.

Life stories order and interpret our life events, for a story is a construct. We resort to story to make an entity of our experiences, and story gives our experiences form and balance. As we create stories, we structure and modify our experiences, and we create generalizations about the world. Others listen to these generalizations. If they have had similar experiences and feelings, they can identify with us. We are united as human beings through our common experiences. If they have not had similar experiences and feelings, they can sympathize with us. Once again we are united as human beings. Writers explore these moments of identification and sympathy when they choose moments from their lives to share with others. And when ordinary, daily life gives writers shattering blows, they can use these events to write about. One such writer is Alice Walker, the eighth child in a family of Georgia sharecroppers. She grew up to win both the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize as well as many fellowships for writing, and is best known for her novel The Color Purple. The blows in her life which I will discuss are blindness and abortion.

Blindness

When Alice was eight years old, she was a tomboy and her playmates were her brothers, two and four years older than she. On Saturday nights they went with their mother to the local moviehouse to see Westerns. At home "on the ranch" they chased

each other for hours pretending to be Tom Mix or Hopalong Cassidy. Finally their parents gave in to the boys' pleas, and bought them BB guns. Alice's brothers shot at everything with their guns while Alice, relegated to the position of Indian, shot only with a bow and arrow. One day while standing on top of their makeshift garage she felt an incredible blow to her right eye. Both brothers rushed to her side. They told her that if she told their parents she was shot, they would get a whipping. Her older brother gave her a piece of wire and told her to say she stepped on one end and it flew up and hit her. As the pain increased, Alice decided to agree to anything that got her to her mother. The children stuck to their story. A week later, after Alice endured a shock and a fever, her parents took her to see a doctor who terrified her by saying,"If one eye is blind, the other will be also." But it was how she looked that bothered her the most. Where the BB pellet had struck, there was a glob of whitish scar. People stared. The cute, outgoing, little girl who once did so well in school would not raise her head again for six years.

From the time of the accident Alice daydreamed--not of fairy tales--but of falling on swords, of putting guns to her heart or head, or of slashing her wrists with a razor. She felt ugly and disfigured (O'Brien, 1973). She writes,

> I believe...that it was from this period--from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast--that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. I never felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read

stories and began to write poems (Walker, 1983, 244-45).

Alice's mother had the wisdom to recognize that Alice had a special gift more valuable than physical beauty. Even when Mrs. Walker was working in the fields or in white women's kitchens and Alice was the only daughter still living at home, Mrs. Walker excused Alice from household chores and respected her need to sit and read.

When Alice was fourteen she baby-sat for her brother Bill who then lived in Boston. He and his wife took Alice to a local hospital where doctors removed the white scar tissue on her eye. Although a small blue crater remained where the scar tissue had been, Alice began to face people again. She won a scholarship to Spelman College in Atlanta, but unhappy at the conservative atmosphere, transferred to Sarah Lawrence. While in her twenties, Alice attended the World Youth Peace Festival in Helsinki and traveled to Africa. She wrote that she traveled like a madwoman, looking and this, looking at that, storing up images against the fading of the light. She never forgot the doctor's words, "Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too." The first time she consciously confronted the meaning of the doctor's words, she was in the African desert and completely in love with what she saw. When she realized that if she had been totally blind she might have missed seeing the desert, she fell to her knees in gratitude for the years of sight she experienced. On her knees in the African desert, poem after poem came to her. One example is called "On Sight" (Gay, 1992, p. 36).

I am so thankful I have seen

The Desert

And the creatures in the desert

And the desert Itself.

The desert has its own moon

Which I have seen

With my own eye.

There is no flag on it.

Trees of the desert have arms

All of which are always up

That is because the moon is up

The sun is up

Also the sky

The stars

Clouds

None with flags.

If there were flags, I doubt

the trees would point.

Would you?

Abortion

Alice's second major life blow occurred when she returned for her senior year at Sarah Lawrence," healthy, brown,... and pregnant" (Gardens, 245). Her childhood dreams of suicide very nearly became a reality. Alone and afraid, she had no one to whom she could turn. Her mother believed abortion was a sin, and when Alice's middle sister Ruth had shown an interest in boys, her father had beat her and locked her in her room. He told her to never come home if she found herself pregnant. When Alice reached out to her two sisters, one never replied and the other called her a slut. Feeling at the mercy of everything, Alice slept with a razor blade under her pillow. At the last moment, a college friend saved her life by giving her the phone number of an abortionist. She drove Alice to the doctor's and afterwards tucked her in bed in the dormitory; another friend brought food from the college cafeteria. Alice fell asleep and dreamt of Africa. Awakening alone before dawn, she nibbled at the food left for her, picked up a small blue notebook and began to write down her dreams. They came out as short poems. As she grew stronger, she slipped the poems daily under the door of her professor, Muriel Rukeyser, who passed them along to her editor at Harcourt who eventually became Alice's editor. These poems, written in an outpouring of creative energy in the week following the abortion, later became Alice's first published volume of poetry.

During this period, Alice received a letter from home. A longtime family friend, known as Mr. Sweet, had died. She had not thought of the old guitar player in years. With tears pouring down her cheeks, she sat and wrote a short story about him. As

she recalled years later, "I was grief-stricken, I was crazed. I was fighting for my own life" (Walker, Living, 39). She entitled the short story, "To Hell With Dying" and took the razor blade from under her pillow and put it in the bathroom where it belonged. The old musician in Georgia had turned her attention to life at a time when death was very much on her mind.

Her professor sent the essay "To Hell With Dying" to Langston Hughes who wrote Alice praising the story and saying he would try to publish it. The story came out two years later, just as Hughes had promised. The essay was Alice's first published work, and in 1987 it was republished as an illustrated children's book.

Alice realized that she was not alone in the world. About Mr. Sweet she wrote, "He went deep into his own pain and brought out words and music that made us happy, made us feel empathy for anyone in trouble, made us think. We were taught to be thankful that anyone would assume this risk" (Walker, Living, 38). From Langston Hughes she learned that he was another Mr. Sweet, "Aging and battered, full of pain, but writing poetry and laughing too, and always making other people feel better" (Walker, Living, 40). In these artists, she saw how they understood that their work was often born of suffering, and they welcomed others who could fight through their pain to make a song or a poem or a painting from the suffering.

Alice Walker could live now. By twenty-one years of age she had learned that writing quite literally could save lives. By twenty-four years of age, with the publication of Once her first volume of poetry which almost immediately went into a second printing, she found not just a way of life but a career. Out of her isolation grew her art,

and the written word would sustain her survival through whatever additional pain came her way. Her life is a passionate testimony to the power of the artist to use her art to overcome life's hardest blows.

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